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ABSTRACT

How current expression of freedom in public education has been established, altered, supported, or reduced by school principals in Virginia over the past 80 years is examined in this oral history research. Thirty-two interviews were conducted to gather personal recollections of retired principals' experiences in Virginia public schools. These interviews were analyzed for freedom themes and related topics. Nine conceptual theme areas related to the ways in which interviewees talked about freedom in the public school environment were developed. These themes included freedom, democracy, way, authority, climate, learning, personnel, policies, and philosophy. The last seven themes modified the expression of the first two. Statements made by the principals in the context of the keywords were interpreted under each of the nine themes. (KM)

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Freedom in Virginia public schools from 1900 to the present: Concepts from an oral history of school principals.

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Maintenance of democratic government in America is founded upon the education of each generation in the ideals of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness first enumerated by our founding fathers. An understanding and appreciation of the concept of freedom is central to acceptance of individual liberty and acknowledgment of human rights. Since public schools are the primary vehicle useful for inculcating democratic values in each generation, it is important that the concepts themselves are well represented in the schools.

A unique opportunity to examine the concept of freedom in Virginia public schools has come with the creation of a historiographic data base that included interviews of retired school principals who have served in Virginia since about 1900. The objective of this research is to analyze the content of these interviews, focusing on the historical view of freedom held by retired principals, while employed in the schools, to describe how freedom has been expressed through the front-line leaders of the educational system of a Revolutionary state.

Research in school democracy has yielded somewhat discouraging results since its inception in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Remmers (1963) may have been the first to conduct a comprehensive survey on the attitudes of public school students towards the United States Bill of Rights, which contains the essential definitions of individual freedom for Americans. From a developmental perspective, Remmers found students somewhat biased in their attitudes toward basic human rights due to their religious preferences, deference to authority figures, and attitudes toward punishing criminal behavior.

More recent research on democratic operations in public schools has indicated that positive benefits may be derived from involving students in decision-making and development of community wide policies (Higgins, 1982). Among the benefits to the school organization found in alternative high schools utilizing participatory democracy were higher student ratings in the use of responsible judgment, greater sense of collective proscosial norms and greater sense of community than students enrolled in comparable traditional high schools.

Hepburn (1983a) reviewed five representative studies of democratic schooling practices which included student, teacher and community member participation in school decision making and found reduced school violence associated with high levels of student input to decision making and high levels of student/teacher interaction. Teacher leadership style in class and organizational

leadership style (principals) out of class seemed to be critical in determining the success of school democratization in the studies reviewed. Hepburn (1983a) also concluded that democratic school practices work best in groups smaller than those typically found in American high schools.

Despite the positive findings of such studies of democratic practice in schools, Hepburn (1983b) still found democratic education in the schools limited by a lack of adequate opportunities for student participation in school decision-making. She characterized modern American schools as essentially undemocratic and suggested that public education be modified to better reflect democratic values.

In Virginia, the state Department of Education promotes a social studies curriculum which has emphasized "The Democratic Legacy - Basis for Freedom" since 1970 (Virginia Department of Education, 1970). Principals and teachers of social studies are urged in the bulletin to promote democratic practices in their school and classrooms and to instill a sense of community in students through carefully structured lessons in American and Virginia history.

Hurst and Shugarman (1985) called for expanding the use of democratic principles beyond knowledge-level study in curricula, like that adopted by Virginia, to experiential study in school operations. They argued for greater student participation in decision making and greater student involvement in the resolution of moral and ethical cases in a July 4 resolution.

Should educational leaders today adopt such an experiential program, they would face at least some of the major challenges Greene (1988) characterized in developing the concept of freedom in school environments. Introducing more freedom in schools must first concentrate on development of individual autonomy, which seems marked now by our predisposition to rate schools through the average cognitive achievement scores of individual students and the outstanding physical performance of individual athletes representing schools in "non-cognitive" contests. Contrary to this thrust in personal education is the desire of adults to have children also acquire moral awareness and consideration for other creatures and community in their interpersonal relationships.

An educated person would thus seem to face at least two prima facie opposing forces in school while striving for freedom. These are the demands for personal independence against erected obstacles like poverty and physical handicaps and competing demands for community socialization where humility and service to others threatens to undermine personal independence.

As educational leaders in schools, principals might then be expected to deal with and resolve this struggle between personal independence and social conformation as they attempt to promote freedom and democracy in each new cohort of students and teachers

they manage. Study of the historical experiences of principals with freedom in the public schools might illuminate successful ways to resolve these potential conflicts.

Methods of Research

This research is intended to describe how our current expression of freedom in public education has been established, altered, supported, or reduced by school principals in the Commonwealth over the past 80 or so years. A series of 32 interviews have been conducted to gather personal recollections of retired principals' experiences in public schooling as part of a long term study in principalship being conducted by Carlton (1990, personal communication). Transcripts of each interview were entered into computer text files that were indexed for keyword searching.

Segments (paragraphs to several pages) of the interviews which centered on the keywords free ,freedom, freed, range, play, self, speech, democracy and democratic were extracted from the data base and analyzed for freedom themes and related topics with a boolean search operation and keyword frequency counting software program (AskSam Ver.5.0, 1990). Counts were made of primary keywords generated from the interview text itself. Secondary keywords were generated from a thesaurus, verified for existence in the interview text and also counted.

Primary and secondary keywords were then aggregated into nine conceptual theme areas related to the ways in which interviewees talked about freedom in the public school environment (See Appendix One). These themes were titled Freedom, Democracy, Way, Authority, Climate, Learning, Personnel, Policies and Philosophy with the last seven modifying expression of the first two. Statements made by the retired principals in the context of primary and secondary keywords were interpreted under each of the nine themes and synthesized by the authors. We apologize to the retired principals, on whose behalf we have written, if we have mis-interpreted anything they said. The results of this analysis are discussed below.

Results of Interpreting Interview Text

Synthesis One: The themes of Climate, Freedom and Democracy within the Authority and Management Style of the principal. (N = 181, 30.8 %)

Keywords: Free (N=6) , Freedom (N=36) , Democractic (N=24), democracy (N=4), Way (N=77) and Authority (N=20).

Freedom for Who?

Retired principals distinguished between the freedoms experienced by students, teachers and administrators. Students were said to be unable to handle too much freedom and to require limited structure and discipline in school. Interviewees also said that students would profit from an air of freedom in school. The retired principals recommended more self-directed learning on the part of students and freedom to talk through problems and resolve them with teachers. Reprimand, rather than abuse was suggested to deal with student excursions outside policy guidelines.

Interviewees also recommended that teachers be given a free hand in classrooms since they know what is best for students. Teacher freedom was thought to be constrained by the realm of school philosophy and effective principals were said to be those allowing teachers lots of freedom within stated policies and guidelines. Allowing teachers freedom to innovate, create and gain professional guidance was said to payoff. Teachers need input to decision making and to know that they have academic freedom. However, it was also suggested that some teachers could not handle freedom well and needed direction from others.

Retired principals felt that they had more freedom than other school inhabitants, due to the general nature of most school board policies. Principals were said to appreciate a Superintendent who allowed them to run their school within guidelines set up by the school system. Characteristics cited for improving positive freedom in schools were impartiality, supportiveness, openness, a listening attitude toward others, trust , rules to protect individual freedom, having some freedom in developing curricula, encouragement and respect for individual choice ,and establishment of a free atmosphere for all personnel.

The Role of Democracy in school

Interviewees also talked about the role of schools in a democracy. They said that we Virginians live in a democracy and that schools have a responsibility to maintain it and are occasionally the salvation of it. They characterized a democratic manner as open, listening to others, non-directive and concerned for relationships. However, a good principal should know when to be democratic and undemocratic.

The Way in which Schools are Managed

Retired principals also felt that school decisions could be made democratically and as close to the point of delivery as possible. They also said that schools should try to get students to realize their own devotion to the democratic way. They recommended trying out different methods for each new cohort of students and teachers, encouraging the widest possible range of alternatives. They thought it paid to be open to staff about policies and to show confidence in them by delegating responsibilities.

Governing Authority in School

Retired principals discussed the importance of authority in maintaining effective schools. They said excessive authority (authoritarianism) can be identified by its focus on tasks, instead of relationships among people. For example, autocrats were described as not listening to teachers. Effective school leaders must be aware of the community power structure, as well as that of their schools. Leadership was defined as the interpersonal influence of an individual exercised through situations and directed by a communication process. A couple of retired principals discussed their use of student government to develop leadership in students and noted that when students governed themselves, disciplinary activity at schools increased.

School Climate

Interviewees placed responsibility for provision of an equal learning opportunity environment square upon the shoulders of school principals. They said that school climates are structured by the interaction between people and schools. A "good" climate was characterized by positive attitudes toward school and motivation.

Synthesis Two: The modifiers of freedom in schools:
(N =407, 69.2%)

Keywords: Learning (N=80), Personnel (N=196), Policies (N=21), Philosophy (N=110).

Positive Learning Environment Features

Attitudes conducive to learning and a desire to find the best learning process were cited as necessary to the creation of a good school learning environment by retired principals. They also discussed the importance of some structure in providing time for learning to occur. Interviewees generally felt that student participation, self-direction and opportunity to experience the best aspects of all fields of study were important to creation of a free learning environment.

Staff relations to the learning process were discussed in regard to their impact on planning and curriculum. Retired

principals suggested allowing staff opportunities to develop school plans by developing openness in the process. Basing decisions upon information and making planning information available to all personnel were also felt valuable in developing a positive learning environment.

Constraints on Free Learning

A few retired principals discussed some common challenges to developing a positive learning environment. Adapting to different learning styles, keeping "bad" teachers out of the school, and the "demand" of children for structure and discipline were cited as limiting the expression of free learning in schools.

Personnel and Freedom

Advice offered by retired principals to persons interested in maintaining more free personnel relationships focused on knowledge of other's attitudes , evaluation processes, direct communication, shared responsibility, and the respect and protection of individual philosophies and freedom. Specific actions taken to expand personnel freedoms were letting teachers determine classroom practice and allowing teachers to develop meeting agendas. The development and maintenance of a non-threatening employment environment with reduced personal pressure was also discussed by interviewees.

Two things cited by respondents to squash personnel freedoms were district-level dictatorship of policy and just plain not listening to teachers or other personnel.

School Policies and Freedom

Retired principals suggested that policies in school be kept general to allow individuals freedom to work within guidelines. School leaders should also invite public comments on school operations and accept group consensus on issues while working with others to address policies. Interviewees also suggested that policy limits be defined before attempting decisions to avoid frustrating those affected. Finally, expressing confidence in others and delegating authority to make decisions were felt to positively affect freedom in school policy making. Negative effects on policy freedom were described as a reluctance to discuss issues with "strangers" and common misunderstandings about policies.

Philosophies and Freedom

Philosophical positions retired principals thought would increase freedom in school were an acceptance of others' views and a willingness to form groups and work with others while sharing responsibilities. Personal philosophical characteristics of school leaders thought critical to expression of freedom in school were a family that shared and the ability to display self-discipline.

Limits on a philosophical approach to developing freedom were a reluctance to deal with strangers and the notion that certain things could not be shared.

Where is Freedom in Virginia Schools Now: A Discussion

As discussed in Greene (1988), it seems as if freedom in Virginia's public schools (and probably elsewhere in America) is developed in the dialectical conflict between individual pursuit of liberties and societal goals of community awareness and the voluntary subjugation of individual freedom to group welfare. Retired principals discussed ways in which the schools act as a forum for the exchange of individual views of students, teachers, administrators, parents and other citizens while serving to mold individual initiatives into the collective benefits perceived to derive from public education.

The conflicts surrounding individual pursuit of freedom seem to center on systematic intolerance for individual divergence from "mainstream" policy and the perception of "classified" roles for individuals in school (students v. teachers v. principals v. superintendent). Schools then, appear to be the site where the tension between individual freedom and societal limits on freedom is resolved for the individuals in each new educational cohort and for the educational systems in which different communities of individuals are observed to operate.

It is interesting to note that principals who perceived themselves as "more" democratic than other colleagues they thought of still identified very similar limits on the expression of freedom in the various schools they led over time. The main difference noted by retired principals between schools led by democratic (and presumed freedom-respecting) principals and others less so was the satisfaction perceived in interpersonal relationships.

Perhaps that is enough for now. Students in the Virginia public schools today have some guarantees of Life, some defined and agreed upon Liberties, and, given democratic leadership, may expect to find some happiness while engaged in education. It is hoped that further studies of the experiences of educational leaders will help shed more light on the dialectus.

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Appendix One. Keyword Data Dictionary

Primary Keyword	N	Secondary Keyword (N)
Free	6	
Freedom (Theme N =42)	36	
Democratic	24	
Democracy (Theme N = 28)	4	
Way (Theme N = 77)	28	Style (9)
		Method (2)
		Behavior (8)
		Open (23)
		Supportive (2)
		Delegate (5)
Authority (Theme N = 20)	4	Authoritarian (7)
		Power (1)
		Influence (2)
		Autocratic (3)
		Government (2)
		Governing (1)
Climate (Theme N = 14)	10	Atmosphere (4)

Modifiers of Public School Freedom

Learning Theme N = 80	19	Program (12)
		System (11)
		Information (4)
		Discipline (4)
		Experience (3)
		Development (3)
		Develop (10)
		Developing (5)
		Curriculum (9)
Personnel Theme N = 196)	3	Principal (37)
		Teacher (88)

		Superintendent (8)
		Dictator (3)
		Administration (2)
		Administrator (8)
		Leader (31)
		Self (3)
		Individual (9)
		Maturity (2)
		Responsible (2)
Policies Theme N = 21	4	Policy (1)
		Problem (10)
		Decision (10)
		Confidence (2)
		Concerned (4)
Philosophy Theme N = 110	12	Talk (8)
		Shared (1)
		Sharing (2)
		Participate (3)
		Communication (3)
		Work (18)
		Working (6)
		View (5)
		Ideas (7)
		Listen (5)
		Opinion (5)
		Difference (7)
		Different (10)
		Express (5)
		Display (2)
		Input (11)

Grand Total Theme N = 588